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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this guide is to provide Americans working with the Hmongs with: (1) some practical information on the Hmongs, their origins and language; (2) a detailed description of the sounds of the Hmong language; and (3) a discussion on Hmong as an unwritten language. This is the first of three guides to be published on the Hmongs, a people who live in scattered areas in Southeast Asia. Hmong refugees in the United States came originally from mountain regions in Laos. In addition to this background information, the following topics are included: sources for further reference; the Hmong sound system, including the general structure of words, consonants, differences between white and blue/green vowels and consonants, and tones; Hmong education and literacy in Laos; Hmong alphabet development in Laos; and the use of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) among refugees. (Author/AMH)

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Indochinese Refugee Education Guides

GENERAL INFORMATION SERIES #14

The Hmong Language: Sounds and Alphabets

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PRELIMINARIES

The purpose of this Guide is to provide Americans working with the Hmongs with first, some practical information on the Hmongs, their origins and language; second, a detailed description of the sounds of the Hmong language; and third, a discussion of Hmong as an unwritten language. This Guide is the first of three that the National Indochinese Clearinghouse is planning to publish on the Hmongs; the second Guide will be a description of Hmong grammar or sentence structure, and the third will consist of cultural information and an extensive bibliography of books and articles on the Hmongs.

We have been looking for materials on the Hmongs for about ten months, and have discovered in the process that relatively little has been written about them; moreover, much of what has been written is hard, if not impossible to find. It is either in the form of unpublished field notes, or buried deep in academic journals, or published in Laos and therefore inaccessible, or out of print. We have nonetheless been able to unearth a surprising amount of information, thanks to the help of people across the world who are working with the Hmongs now, or who have worked with them in the past. It is a great pleasure to acknowledge the help of Anne Lomperis, the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service in New York; G. Linwood Barney, of the Alliance School of Theology and Missions in Nyack, New York; Mac Thompson, of the U.S. A.I.D.; Joyce Burns and Gail Magee of the Orange County Department of Social Services in Santa Ana, California; the staff of the ESL program at the Vocational/Technical Center in Missoula, Montana; Suzanne Tuers, of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.; Suzanne Bessac, of Missoula, Montana; David DeCamp, of the University of Texas in Austin; Doris Whitelock, of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship in Thailand; and Earl Young, of the U.S. Department of State.

It will become apparent, as you read the Hmong guides, that we could not have gotten very far beyond reporting on available sources of information, if we had not had the help of Mr. Koumarn Yang See. Yang See has spent numerous hours with us, as a native informant for our forays into the sound and syntactic systems of the Hmong language; he has read, re-read and proof-read every word we have written on the Hmongs; he has lent us his dictionaries, newsletters and other materials; and he has provided us with firsthand information on the Hmongs in Laos, out of his work with French anthropologists when he was in high school, and his subsequent experiences working with various U.S. agencies in Laos and in the Hmong refugee camps in Thailand.

We are also indepted to Mr. Moua Chou, of the Orange County Department of Social Services, in Santa Ana, California. Moua Chou was our first source of information on the Hmongs; his patient explanations of some basic facts, and the materials he has shared with us, have been invaluable.

SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Hmongs are a group of people, with a particular language and culture, who live in scattered areas in China, Thailand, Laos, Burma and Vietnam. They originated in China, and have migrated during the last two centuries into Southeast Asia. Peoples in the Far East call them and their language Meo, Miao or Miau; their name for themselves is Hmong. The Hmong spelling is the one which is used most widely among linguists, anthropologists and missionaries who have recently worked with the Hmong; other spellings include Mung, Mong, Muong, H'mong, Hmuong and Hmoob. (The rationale or lack of it behind these other spellings is discussed in the section on alphabets.) References, books and articles on the Hmongs in China typically refer to them as Miao; the entries in the Encyclopedia Brittanica, for example, are under Miao rather than Hmong. References to the Hmongs in Southeast Asia are generally to the Meo. If you are looking up the Hmongs in a reference book, you should check under all the spellings of Hmong and the three spellings of Meo before throwing in the towel.

It is impossible to tell (and not overly important) whether all the Hmongs in the Far East speak the same language, or languages which are closely related to one another. (The usual test is mutual intelligibility: if a speaker of X and a speaker of Y can understand each other, then X and Y are presumably different dialects of the same language; if they can't understand each other, then X and Y are considered to be different languages.) Everyone seems to agree that the Miao language or languages are closely related to the Yao languages spoken in China and Southeast Asia. The relationships between the Miao-Yao languages and the other language groups spoken in the Far East haven't been determined. It is clear, however, that the language spoken by the Hmong refugees in the United States is different from Lao, Khmer, Chinese or Vietnamese; it has its own sound system, grammar and vocabulary.

As far as we can tell, all the Hmong refugees in the United States came originally from Laos. The Hmongs are one of the minority ethnic groups that inhabit the mountain regions of Laos. They are different from the Lao people,

who constitute the majority ethnic group in the country. A quick, generally reliable way to distinguish a Hmong from an ethnic Lao is that Hmong names are almost always one-syllable, whereas Lao names are usually poly-syllabic. So Yang See and Moua Chou are Hmongs, whereas Saly Chittavoravong and Somsanith Khamvongsa are ethnic Laos. While most of the Hmongs will probably speak some Lao, virtually none of the ethnic Laos will speak Hmong -- in this respect, the ethnic Laos and Hmongs stand in the same relationship to each other as do, say, the Sioux Indians and the rest of the American population: most of the Sioux speak some English, but very, very few English-speaking Americans speak any of the Sioux languages.

The Hmongs are classified into several sub-groups, which seem to be determined by cultural characteristics such as dress, and probably dialectal differences as well. If you look at the anthropological literature on the Hmongs, you see articles on such groups as the Cowrie Shell Miao, the Magpie Miao, the Flowery Miao, and so on.

The Hmongs in Laos, apparently , are either White Hmongs (Hmong Daw) or Blue/Green Hmongs (Hmong Njua). We are referring to the Hmong Njua as Blue/Green Hmongs, with the two color-terms and slash mark, because the word njua translates into English sometimes as 'blue' and sometimes as 'green', depending on the shade of blue or green referred to. There are sub-divisions within the Blue/Green Hmongs; most of the work with the Blue/Green Hmongs in Laos, for example, has been done among the Striped Hmongs.

The White and Blue/Green Hmongs speak different dialects of the same language. As you will see in the following sections, there are systematic differences in the sound systems of the dialects, but these don't prevent their speakers from understanding one another. The two dialects are probably not as different from each other as, say, the Georgia and Massachusetts varieties of American English are.

A potential source of confusion for Americans working with the Hmongs is names. The Hmongs traditionally do not have last names, or surnames, as do Europeans, other refugee groups like the Vietnamese, or Americans. On being admitted to refugee status and permitted to come to the United States, the Hmongs have more or less had to manufacture surnames for themselves. Immigration forms, like every form any of us has ever filled out, have spaces for last name, first name, and so on!

At birth, a Hmong child is given a single-syllable name like Yee, or Chou, or Pao, or Dia, or Fu; this given name functions as our first names do. Occasionally a child will be called by his name preceded by a diminutive - Tou for a boy, and My for a girl: so a girl might grow up being called My Dia, or a boy Tou Pao. Sometimes, when a man has settled down to family life, his wife's parents give him an honorary name. So Pao, on marrying and having children, perhaps, is honored by his parents-in-law, who give him the honorary name of Tsue; from then on people call him Tsue Pao.

A Hmong individual's name, then, consists of his given name, with possibly a diminutive or an honorary; if a Hmong asks another Hmong what his name is (with a sentence which translates roughly as "How are you called?") the answer will be the given name ("I am called Chou"), sometimes preceded by a diminutive ("I am called My Dia") or an honorary name ("I am called Tsue Pao").

The name of an individual's clan is not considered part of his personal name. All Hmong society is divided into about twenty clans; a child, at birth, is automatically a member of his or her father's clan. Clan membership plays an important role in social relationships; a man must marry outside his clan, and relationships between the clans must be maintained in such a way that marriages can be arranged and proceed smoothly. On a day-to-day basis in conversation, clan membership determines what titles people are addressed by: if you're talking to someone from your clan, the title you address him by will be different from the title of a comparable individual who belongs to another clan. There are too many of these titles to discuss here, but they are parallel to our use of kinship terms like aunt and uncle in titles like "Aunt Betsy" or "Uncle Bill".

Each Hmong clan has a name, of course; here is a list of the most common Hmong clans, furnished to us by Moua Chou. We have listed all the spellings we have run across.

1. Chang
2. Fang
3. Hang
4. Heu, Her
5. Khang
6. Kong
7. Kue
8. Lo, Lor
9. Ly, Li, Lee, Le
10. Moua
11. Phang
12. Thao, Tao
13. Vang
14. Vue
15. Xiong, Shoong
16. Yang

To summarize, in traditional Hmong society an individual has a given name, and belongs to a particular clan, but does not have a name that functions like an American or European surname. All of this has naturally led to wide variation and inconsistency in the choice of 'last' names among the Hmong, on being expected to put something in the 'last name' space on official forms and documents.

Most of the time, the clan name has been converted into a 'last' name; as there are only about twenty clans, the result is that there are very few 'last' names among the Hmong refugees in the United States! Some of the Hmongs have adopted a Lao name as an official surname: Yang See is officially listed as Koumarn Yang See, the Koumarn coming from his association with Laos when he was in school. Other Hmongs have adopted titles as 'last' names, or honorary names.

As there is no tradition of surnames among the Hmongs, there is of course no conventional order of first and last names for the Hmongs to fall back on in deciding what to do with their new surnames. In conversation with Americans, Hmong men seem to prefer to be called by both the clan and the given name, but the order varies from individual to individual; Yang See says that the order is whatever 'sounds best' to the person involved.

As we mentioned earlier, a Hmong man traditionally must marry outside his clan; his wife or wives do not "join" his clan on marrying him, but remain members of their father's clans. A married Hmong woman, coming to the United States and having to manufacture a last name, would therefore be quite unlikely to adopt her husband's clan name, but would probably adopt the name of her own clan. The result of all this is that in a particular Hmong family, the father and children are likely to have the same official surname, but the mother won't.

SOME SOURCES FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

We mentioned in the Preliminaries section that we are planning, in a future Guide, to provide a bibliography of materials on the Hmongs. Most of the references will be of an academic anthropological or linguistic nature, and are hard to find, not to mention hard to read. There are sources, however, which are of a more general nature, and which are easier to find. We are listing some of them here, so that you will have an immediate place to turn for further information on the Hmongs.

Garrett, W.E. 'No Place To Run: The Hmong of Laos'. National Geographic Vol. 145, No. 1. (January, 1974), pp. 78-111.

An article (with glorious pictures) on the Hmongs, which among other things contrasts traditional village life with conditions imposed by the war. The maps are especially helpful.

Heimbach, Ernest E. White Meo - English Dictionary. Data Paper No. 75, Southeast Asia Program. Ithaca, New York: Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1969. (Price: $5.00)

The most accessible of the dictionaries of Hmong, in terms of price and availability. However, existing Hmong dictionaries are intended for linguists and anthropologists, and not for translating or language-learning. (The three dictionaries we have seen are actually compilations of authors' field notes.) This dictionary lists the Hmong words in an alphabet likely to be known by educated Hmongs, and has lots of interesting information in its appendices.

Kunstadter, Peter, ed. Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967.

Two articles in this book are especially informative on the Hmongs: Chapter 6, 'Government and the Hill Tribes of Laos', by G. M. T. Osborn, (pp. 259-270), and Chapter 7, 'The Meo of Xieng Khouang Province, Laos' by G. Linwood Barney (pp. 271-293). Osborn's article describes the Lao government's dealings with the minorities in Laos in the fifties and sixties. Barney's is a general description of the geographical distribution of the Hmongs in Laos, Hmong social and political organization, economy, material culture, folklore, and cultural changes brought on by natural factors (before the war).

Lyman, Thomas A. Dictionary of Mong Njua. The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1974 (Price: $68.00)

This dictionary is a highly technical work; the Hmong words are written in quasi-phonetic transcription which will be unfamiliar to the Hmongs. There's an excellent bibliography of work done on the Hmongs in China and Thailand, and the appendices contain some interesting information. Mong Njua is the Blue/Green dialect of Hmong.

Martin, Frank W. 'Up Front' People, August 29, 1977, pp. 18-21.

An article on the Hmong General Vang Pao, who is the acknowledged leader of the Hmong refugees in the United States.

Shaplen, Robert. 'A Reporter at Large: Survivors' The New Yorker, September 5, 1977, pp. 33-66.

A long, detailed article on the refugee camps in Thailand, with many references to and descriptions of the Hmong camps.

Vang, Tou-Fu. 'The Hmong from Laos'. Xeroxed article from The Association for Hmongs. (Write to Mr. Tou-Fu Vang, Governer's Information Center for Asian Assistance, 160 North LaSalle Street, Chicago, Ill. 60601, for information).

A brief account of the Hmongs in Laos, especially their involvement in U.S. military activities; information on Hmong resettlement in the U.S.; and information on the Association for Hmong.

"The Peoples of Mainland Southeast Asia", National Geographic, Vol. 142, No. 3 (March, 1971), pp. 296-364.

A double article on the different peoples of Southeast Asia, with some, but not much, information on the Hmongs. The map, which is available separately from the National Geographic offices, is especially useful.

THE HMONG SOUND SYSTEM

Preliminaries

As you read through this section, it will become clear how much we owe to the missionary/linguists/anthropologists who worked among the Hmong in Laos and Thailand during the fifties and sixties. Our understanding of the Hmong sound system, along with a good many of our examples, comes from the unpublished field notes of G. Linwood Barney and W. A. Smalley, and from Smalley's article "The Problems of Consonants and Tone: Hmong (Meo, Miao)", which is Chapter IV of his book, Phonemes and Orthography: Language Planning and Ten Minority Languages of Thailand. In addition, we have had access to Ernest Heimbach's White Meo-English Dictionary, mentioned in the last section, and Yves Bertrais-Charrier's Dictionnaire Hmong (Meo Blanc) - Francais. Full bibliographical details on all of these are given at the end of this section.

While our understanding of the sound system comes from the works listed above, it was Yang See and Moua Chou, whose help to us was previously mentioned, who demonstrated for us how the language actually sounds. Yang See, a White Hmong, has checked our descriptions and examples of the White dialect, and Moua Chou, a Blue/Green Hmong, has done the same for the Blue/Green dialect.

In describing the sound system of an unwritten language like Hmong, the problem of representation on paper looms large. Our major purpose is to give you an idea of what the language sounds like. With this in mind, we have represented each example in a semi-phonetic alphabet which is as close to English as we can get it and still be accurate.

Reading a description of a sound system won't make much sense, however, unless you can hear what's being discussed. We strongly urge, therefore, that you ask a native speaker of Hmong to pronounce the examples for you. But a Hmong - even if he can read English well - is not going to be able to figure out, from our phonetic representations, what on earth you want him to say. (This is to be expected; the phonetic representation in effect interprets the Hmong sounds for English speakers, and the "interpretation" does not match the native speaker's sense of his own language at all.)

To get around this problem, we have also written each example in an alphabet which is informal use among some of the educated Hmongs, on the off chance that your Hmong friend or student has learned to read Hmong in this alphabet somewhere along the line. We're calling the alphabet the RPA - the Romanized Popular Alphabet, which is what Smalley (who was one of its designers) calls it in his "Consonants and Tones" article.

The RPA will look strange until you get used to it. While it is a very efficient alphabet for Hmong, it departs radically from the usual practices of Roman alphabets, and is therefore hard to read at first. The most startling departure is the representation of tones as final consonants; others will become apparent as you work through the examples. We will discuss the development and use of the RPA in the next section.

In the meantime, we have represented each example in two alphabets: the RPA on the chance that your Hmong friend can read it, and the phonetic representation to give you a better understanding of what's being said. All spellings in RPA are underlined (e.g. Hmoob); all phonetic representations are enclosed in []'s (e.g. [hmong^{1}]); and all translations are in single quotes (e.g. 'Hmong').

We have not forgotten the possibility that your Hmong friend or student won't be able to read the RPA, or, for that matter, to speak English well. We have chosen examples with this possibility in mind, restricting ourselves to words the translations of which the beginning English student is likely to know, or words for things which can be pointed at.

You will notice that we have presented the White Hmong dialect, then discussed ways in which Blue/Green Hmong differs from it. We have done so for rhetorical reasons: White Hmong is the more complicated dialect, in terms of number of sounds, and it is easier to describe less complicated dialects in terms of more complicated dialects than the other way around.

The General Structure of Words

Hmong words are almost always of one syllable; those that aren't usually compounds like English blackbird or matchbook. A syllable in Hmong consists of a vowel or diphthong, preceded by anywhere from zero to three consonants; the syllable has one of seven tones associated with it. There are no consonants at the ends of words except an occasional ng.

Consonants. Hmong has lots of consonants: thirty-two in White Hmong and twenty-eight in Blue/Green Hmong, as compared with the twenty-two consonants in English (we're talking about sounds, not letters). Most of the Hmong consonants occur in English, but we don't recognize them as separate, distinct sounds in many cases: what sound to us, for example, like four successive - if slightly different - pronunciations of [k], sound to Hmongs as four entirely different sounds. The consonants in Hmong are listed in the following chart. (Remember that the letters, which are underlined, are those of the Roman Popular Alphabet; the pronunciation, enclosed in []'s, is to give you an idea of what to expect.)

RPA Letter	Pronunciation	Example	Notes
ph	[p']	phem ['p'ey^{7}] 'bad'	This consonant is like English p as in pen. The apostrophe, like the h in the RPA, represents a puff of air associated with the pronunciation of the p. We have that puff of air with some of the p's in English: you can feel it if you hold the back of your hand up close to your mouth when you say pen.
p	[p]	peb [pey^{1}] 'three'	This sound is a p without the puff of air; it will sound sometimes like p and sometimes like b until you get used to it. English has this kind of "unpuffy" p in words with sp, like spin or spell, among others. You can feel the puff of air, or lack of it, on the back of your hand as you pronounce pin and spin.
th	[t']	them [t'ey^{7}] 'pay'	This sound is like English t, except that the tongue touches the back of the upper teeth (as in Spanish t's) rather than the ridge

RPA Letter	Pronunciation	Example	Notes
			behind the teeth as in English. The apostrophe and h represent the same puff of air as they do for p.
t	[t]	teb [tey^{1}] 'field'	Like Hmong th [t'] only without the puff of air. It will sound sometimes like t, sometimes like d until you get used to it. English has this kind of t in words like still.
rh	[t']	rhuav [t'ua^{3}] 'destroy'	This will sound somewhat like tr. It's a variety of t, pronounced by curling the tongue so its tip hits the roof of the mouth farther back than for English t. English r is made by curling the tongue in a similar fashion, but there the resemblance between English r and Hmong rh or [t'] ends. The apostrophe and h still represent a puff of air.
r	[t]	ris [ti^{5}] 'trousers'	This is the sound above without the puff of air; it will sound like English d until you get used to it. To our ears, the distinction between the Hmong [t]'s and [t]'s is very subtle!
ch	[ty']	cheb [ty'ey^{1}] 'sweep'	This will sound like ty. (If you pronounce English tune as 'tyoon', you probably pronounce it fairly close to this Hmong [ty']. The apostrophe and h represent the usual puff of air.
c	[ty]	ceg [tyey^{6}] 'leg'	Like the sound above without the puff of air. It will sound sometimes like ty and sometimes like dy until you get used to it.
kh	[k']	khi [k'i^{4}] 'tie'	This is like English k as in kill, which is pronounced with the same kind of puff of air as t and p.

RPA Letter	Pronunciation	Example	Notes
k	[k]	kev [key^{3}] 'road'	This is English k without the puff of air, as in skill. Hmong [k] will sound sometimes like k, sometimes like g as in get, until you get used to it.
qh	[k']	qhev [k'ey^{3}] 'servant'	This is a k pronounced far back in the mouth. English has it in words before vowels like o and u (which are pronounced in the back of the mouth), but not before the vowels like e (pronounced in the front of the mouth). Hmong [k]'s, then, will sometimes sound like ordinary k's, and sometimes like weird k's. The apostrophe and h still represent a puff of air.
q	[k]	qij [ki^{2}] 'garlic'	The sound above, only without the puff of air. It will sound like k or g as in go until you get used to it.
txh	[ts']	txhom [ts'ɔ^{7}] 'catch'	This is a t closely followed by an s, a combination which occurs all the time in English (wants, hats, and so on) but rarely at the beginnings of words (tsetse!). The apostrophe and h still represent the puff of air.
tx	[ts]	txiv [tsi^{3}] 'father'	Like [ts'], only without the puff of air. It might sound at times like dz.
tsh	[ch']	tsheb [ch'ey^{1}] 'vehicle'	This consonant is like English ch as in church. The apostrophe and h function as usual.
ts	[ch]	tsuaq [chua^{6}] 'flavorless'	Like [ch'], only without the puff of air. It will sometimes sound like j as in judge.

The sixteen consonants described so far form a series of pairs; one of the pair members is pronounced with a puff of air, the other isn't. The technical name for this puff-of-air is aspiration. Aspiration is phonetically represented typically with an apostrophe after the consonant (which is the

route we took in the pronunciation column) or with an h after the consonant (which is thr route the RPA takes). Here are the sixteen consonants again, arranged in pairs:

Aspirated:	ph [p']	th [t']	rh [ṭ']	ch [ty']
Unaspirated:	p [p]	t [t]	r [ṭ]	c [ty]
Aspirated:	kh [k']	qh [q̇']	txh [ts']	tsh [ch']
Unaspirated:	k [k]	q [q̇]	tx [ts]	ts [ch]

Obviously, aspiration is an important feature of the Hmong system of consonants. As we have indicated, there are aspirated and unaspirated varieties of p, t, k, and ch in English, but English speakers don't hear them as different sounds. The unaspirated p in spill, for example, sounds identical to the aspirated p in pill to us, whereas a Hmong speaker would hear them as quite different. (English speakers have to train their ears to hear the difference between aspirated and unaspirated consonants. This isn't hard: if you have had a Hmong pronounce the examples for you, you by now probably have a pretty good feeling for aspiration.)

The remainder of the Hmong consonants are as follows:

RPA Letter	Pronunciation	Example	Notes
f	[f]	fim [fi^{7}] 'greet'	Like English f.
v	[v]	vim [vi^{7}] 'because'	Like English v most of the time. Sometimes it will sound like w.
x	[s]	xav [sa^{3}] 'think'	Like English s.
xy	[sy]	xyuas [syua^{5}] 'visit'	Like English s closely followed by a y. If you pronounce suit as 'syoot', you probably come close to this Hmong [sy].
z	[zh]	zos [zhɔ^{5}] 'village'	Like English zh as in measure or beige, or French j as in Jacques or joli.
s	[sh]	sim [shi^{7}] 'try'	Like English sh as in she.

RPA Letter	Pronunciation	Example	Notes
y	[y]	yog [yɔ^{6}] 'right'	Like English y as in yes.
h	[h]	hu [hu^{4}] 'call'	Like English h as in hi.
m	[m]	mem [mey^{7}] 'ink'	Like English m.
hm	[hm]	Hmoob [hmong^{1}] 'Hmong'	An m, but without the vocal cords vibrating. (Close your lips as if to say m, but breathe out hard instead, and you'll have produced a loud [hm].) This is not, remember, an h followed by an m, but a single sound.
n	[n]	nej [ney^{2}] 'you-all'	Like English n, but with the tongue touching the back of the upper teeth, like Spanish n.
hn	[hn]	hnab [hna^{1}] 'bag'	An n, but without the vocal cords vibrating. Put your tongue up to say n, leave it there and breathe out: that's an [hn].
ny	[ñ]	nyob [ño^{1}] 'be at'	Like the ny combination in Spanish Señor, or in English canyon.
hny	[hñ]	hnyav [hña^{3}] 'heavy'	Like ny, but without the vocal cords vibrating.
-	[ng]	Hmoob [hmong^{1}] 'Hmong'	This is the ng sound in English sing, which is the only consonant that occurs at the ends of words in Hmong. We will talk about it later, when we discuss nasalized vowels.
l	[l]	lev [ley^{3}] 'mat'	Pretty much like English l as in least.
hl	[hl]	hli [hli^{4}] 'moon'	An l pronounced without the vocal cords vibrating, parallel to [hm], [hn] and [hñ]; remember, it's not an h followed by an l. This voiceless l occurs in Welsh; the double l in Welsh names like Lloyd and Llewellyn represents it.

That's all thirty-two (thirty-three if you count ng) of the consonants in White Hmong.

Certain combinations, or clusters, of these thirty-two can also occur in Hmong, again at the beginnings but not the ends of words. l [l] can occur after the various [p]'s and [m]'s:

Letters	Pronunciation	Example
pl	[pl]	plev [pley^{3}] 'sting'
plh	[p'l]	plhu [p'lu^{4}] 'cheek'
ml	[ml]	mlom [mlɔ^{7}] 'statue'
hml	[hml]	hmlos [hmlɔ^{5}] 'indentation'

In Blue/Green Hmong, [l] can occur with [t] and [t'] as well:

-	[tl]	[tley^{1}] 'distant'
-	[t'l]	[t'lẽy^{3}] 'suddenly'

White Hmong has [d] for Blue/Green Hmong [tl], and an aspirated [dh] for Blue/Green Hmong [t'l]. The White Hmong words corresponding to the above examples are therefore:

RPA Letters	Pronunciation	Example
d	[d]	deb [dey^{1}] 'distant
dh	[dh]	dheev [dheng^{3}] 'suddenly'

Note that the RPA follows White Hmong pronunciation in its choice of symbols, rather than Blue/Green Hmong.

In addition to these clusters with [l], clusters can also occur with a nasal consonant (i.e. an [m], [n] or [ng]) plus any one of the sixteen consonants in the aspirated-unaspirated series described earlier.

The nasal consonants are called nasals because they are made by stopping the air in the mouth and sending it out the nose. (To be convinced of this, say mm-mmmm, and in the middle grab your nose. You'll find that you won't be able to make any noise with your nose stopped up.)

The consonant clusters about to be listed are a very nice example of what is technically called assimilation. Assimilation is a phonetic phenomenon whereby sounds which occur before or after each other take on each other's phonetic characteristics. In this case in Hmong, the nasal consonant is pronounced in exactly the same place in the mouth as the immediately following consonant: the nasal consonant in clusters with q [k], for example (which we described as a k pronounced far back in the mouth), involve a nasal produced correspondingly far back in the mouth. The upshot of all this is that there are phonetically eight different nasals produced.

We have much the same kind of nasal assimilation in English, but nowhere near as elaborate. The n in thank, for example, isn't an [n] at all, but an [ng], which is pronounced in the same part of the mouth as the following [k]. All n's in English which immediately precede k's in the same syllable are phonetically [ng]'s.

Just as the English speaker isn't generally aware that the n in thank really isn't an [n], the Hmong speaker doesn't hear those eight nasals as different sounds. This is reflected in the RPA use of the letter n for all eight nasals, as you will notice.

There's another kind of assimilation going on with these clusters. In describing the unaspirated consonants, we commented that the unaspirated [p] might sound like [b], the unaspirated [t] like [d], and so on. In these clusters with nasals, the unaspirated consonants will unequivocally sound like [b]'s [d]'s and [g]'s to you, because that's what they are phonetically. The unaspirated consonants (which when by themselves are pronounced without the vocal cords vibrating) are pronounced with the vocal cords vibrating when preceded by a nasal (which is pronounced with the vocal cords vibrating); to be technical (not to say more confusing) about it, the unaspirated consonants assimilate to the preceding nasals in voicing. To be non-technical about it, the Hmong speaker sets vocal cords vibrating for the nasal, and doesn't bother to shut them off when he gets to the unaspirated consonant.

In the examples below, note the difference between the letters of the RPA (which in effect represent what the Hmong speaker thinks he hears and says) and the pronunciation guide (which is in this case a rough picture of what the Hmong speaker actually says).

RPA Letters	Pronunciation	Example
np	[mb]	npe [mbey^{4}] 'name'
nph	[mp']	nphau [mp'au^{4}] 'turbulent'
nt	[nd]	ntev [ndey^{3}] 'long'
nth	[nt']	nthuav [nt'ua^{3}] 'open'
nr	[nd̤']	nroj [nd̤ɔ^{2}] 'weeds'
nrh	[nt̤']	nrho [nt̤'ɔ^{4}] 'completely'
nc	[ñdy]	ncej [ñdyey^{2}] 'post, pillar'
nch	[ñty']	nchuav [ñty'ua^{3}] 'pour out'
nk	[ngg]	nkauj [nggau^{2}] 'song'
nkh	[ngk']	nkhaus [ngk'au^{5}] 'twisted'
nq	[ngk]	nqeeb [ngkeng^{1}] 'thatch'
nqh	[ngk']	nqhuab [ngk'ua^{1}] 'dry'
ntx	[ndz]	ntxuav [ndzua^{3}] 'wash'
ntxh	[nts']	ntxhais [nts'ai^{5}] 'daughter'
nts	[nj]	ntsuab [njua^{1}] 'green'
ntsh	[nch']	ntshai [nch'ai^{4}] 'fear'

To complete the list of consonant clusters in Hmong, there are the following nasal-plus-consonant-plus-[l] clusters:

RPA Letters	Pronunciation	Example
npl	[mbl]	nplog [mblɔ^{6}] 'Lao'
nplh	[mp'l]	nplhaib [mp'lai^{1}] 'finger ring'

Differences between White Hmong and Blue/Green Hmong consonants. As we mentioned before, the list of consonants above is based on White Hmong pronunciation, as is the RPA. Blue/Green pronunciation of the consonants is pretty much the same as White pronunciation, with the following differences.

Blue/Green Hmong does not have the [hm]-[m], [hn]-[n], [hñ]-[ñ] distinctions: a word pronounced with an [hm] by a White Hmong would be pronounced with an [m] by a Blue/Green Hmong. The word Hmoob, meaning 'Hmong', then, is pronounced [hmong^{1}] by White Hmongs, and [mong^{1}] by Blue/Green Hmongs. (Which is why some of the spellings of Hmong start with just the m!)

This difference between White and Blue/Green Hmong with regard to the nasals is a common sort of difference among dialects of a language. A parallel example in English is the dialectal variation in the pronunciation of pairs like which - witch; where - wear; and when - wen. Some speakers of American English pronounce the beginning consonants in the words in the pairs the same, while other speakers pronounce them differently. The English spelling system "favors" the pronunciation of those who differentiate between the words, by spelling the beginning sound differently (wh as opposed to w). In a parallel fashion, RPA differentiates hm from m.

Another major difference in the pronunciation of consonants between the two dialects is one we have already mentioned: the Blue/Green pronunciation of the RPA letter d is [tl], and its pronunciation of the RPA letters dh is [t'l]; White Hmong pronounces them [d] and [dh] respectively. In addition, Blue/Green has a consonant cluster [ndl] which is pronounced [nd] in White.

The chart below lists the dialectal differences discussed above, with examples.

RPA Letter	White Hmong Pronunciation	Blue/Green Hmong Pronunciation
hm, Hmoob, 'Hmong'	[hm], [hmong^{1}]	[m], [mong^{1}]
m, mem, 'ink'	[m], [mey^{7}]	[m], [mey^{7}]
hn, hnab 'bag'	[hn], [hna^{1}]	[n], [na^{1}]
n, nej 'you-all'	[n], [ney^{2}]	[n], [ney^{2}]
hny, hnyav 'heavy'	[hñ], [hña^{3}]	[ñ], [ña^{3}]
ny, nyob 'be at'	[ñ], [ñɔ^{1}]	[ñ], [ñɔ^{1}]
d, deb 'distant'	[d], [dey^{1}]	[tl], [tley^{1}]
dh, dheev 'suddenly'	[dh], [dheng^{3}]	[t'l], [t'lẽy^{3}]
nd, ndog 'roll by itself'	[nd], [ndɔ^{6}]	[ndl], [ndlɔ^{6}]
nt, ntev 'long'	[nd], [ndey^{3}]	[nd], [ndey^{3}]

In addition to these regular correspondences between the dialects, there are occasional words which are pronounced one way in one dialect, the other way in the other.

Vowels

The vowel system of Hmong is not as complicated to describe as the consonant system. There are six simple vowels (as opposed to nine or eleven in English, depending on your analysis -- remember again that we're talking about sounds, not letters), two nasal vowels, and five diphthongs in White Hmong, which is again the dialect whose pronunciation we describe below.

RPA Letter	Pronunciation	Example	Notes
i	[i]	tib [ti^{1}] 'pile up'	Like English ee as in beet.
w	[ɨ]	twm [tɨ^{7}] 'water buffalo'	This sound occurs in unstressed syllables in English, for example in the second syllable of normally-pronounced roses.
u	[u]	tub [tu^{1}] 'son'	Like English u as in boot or tube.
e	[ey]	teb [tey^{1}] 'field'	Like English ey as in they.
o	[ɔ]	toj [tɔ^{2}] 'hill'	If you're one of those who pronounce cot and caught differently, this is the vowel in caught. If you pronounce caught and cot the same, this vowel is half-way between the vowel in cot and the vowel in coat.
a	[a]	pab [pa^{1}] 'help'	Like English a as in wash.

And here are the diphthongs:

RPA Letters	Pronunciation	Example	Notes
ia	[ia]	tiab [tia^{1}] 'skirt'	Like the ia's in Tia Maria.
ua	[ua]	tuaj [tua^{2}] 'come'	Like the diphthong spelled ewa in renewable, or in ua in pursuable.
ai	[ai]	tais [tai^{5}] 'bowl'	Like the ai's in Mai Tai.
au	[au]	tau [tau^{4}] 'be able'	Like English au in Faust, or ou in announce.
aw	[ɔɨ]	dawb [dɔɨ^{1}] 'white'	Very close to the vowel sound in English duck or fuss.

And here are the two nasalized vowels:

RPA Letters	Pronunciation	Example	Notes
oo	[ong]	Hmoob [hmong^{1}] 'Hmong'	The vowel o as in boat, followed by an ng - easy to pronounce, but not a combination we have in English.
ee	[eng]	tseeb [cheng^{1}] 'truly'	Like English eng as in length, or in normal conversation like English ung as in hung.

If you're wondering why the designers of RPA chose to represent the nasal vowels as doubled letters, rather than ong or eng as would seem sensible from the actual pronunciation, their decision has to do with reserving the last space in words for a consonant representing the tone. They didn't want to complicate the picture by having final consonants represent anything but tone. There are linguistic justifications for their choice as well, which have to do with the fact that these doubled letters are pronounced alternately as phonetic nasalized vowels, and as vowels plus ng, depending on the dialect. At any rate, the RPA spelling of Hmong as Hmoob is now explained: the doubled o represents [ong], and the final b represents the tone.

Differences between White Hmong and Blue/Green Hmong vowels. As is usually the case among dialects of a language, the vowel correspondences between the two dialects of Hmong are rather messy to describe. In the chart below, we will go through all the vowels, indicating the different pronunciations and giving examples.

RPA Letter	White Hmong Pronunciation	Blue/Green Hmong Pronunciation
i, u, e, ua, ai, au	Same in both dialects	
w, twm 'water buffalo'	[ɨ], [tɨ^{7}]	[ü], [tü^{7}] ([ü] is the vowel in French tu.)
aw, dawb 'white'	[əɨ], [dəɨ^{1}]	[əü], [tləü^{1}]
ee, tseeb 'truly'	[eng], [cheng^{1}]	[ẽ], [chẽ^{1}] (a nasal ey)
oo, Hmoob 'Hmong'	[ong], [hmong^{1}]	[õ], [mõ^{1}] (a nasal o, as in French bon)
o, toj 'hill'	[ɔ], [tɔ^{2}]	Some Blue/Green speakers have [u], [tu^{2}].
a, aa, pab 'help' paab	[a], [pa^{1}]	[ã], [pã^{1}] (a nasal a)
ia, a, tiab 'skirt' tab	[ia], [tia^{1}]	[a], [ta^{1}]

Note that, in the case of a and ia, RPA departs from its usual practice of representing the pronunciation of the White Hmong dialect, and has different spellings for the White and Blue/Green pronunciations.

Tones

Hmong is, of course, a tone language. Every syllable is pronounced with one of seven tones; a particular syllable will have different meanings - i.e. be different words - if it is pronounced with different tones. The Hmong tones differ

from one another mostly in pitch. In the following chart, we will present each of the tones, with a brief description (which won't mean a thing unless you have a Hmong speaker pronounce the examples for you), the RPA final consonant which represents it, and the number we have been using.

Tone description	RPA	Number	Example
high	b	1	pob [pɔ^{1}] 'lump'
high falling	j	2	poj [pɔ^{2}] 'female'
mid rising	v	3	pov [pɔ^{3}] 'throw'
mid	-	4	po [pɔ^{4}] 'pancreas'
low	s	5	pos [pɔ^{5}] 'thorn'
low breathy	g	6	pog [pɔ^{6}] 'paternal grandmother'
short low abrupt end	m	7	pom [pɔ^{7}] 'see'

Note that the number system we have been using to represent the pronunciation of the tones - which we have borrowed wholesale from Smalley's Consonants and Tones' article - corresponds to the tones arranged from high to low pitch, roughly. Yang See says that Hmongs, in teaching their friends the RPA, 'list' the tones the other way around, from low to high! They use the following phrase as a mnemonic device:

RPA:	Niam	neeg	mus	ua	kuv	siab	ntuj.
Pron:	[nia^{7}	neng^{6}	mu^{5}	ua^{4}	ku^{3}	shia^{1}	ndu^{2}]
Lit. trans:	'woman'	'man'	'go'	'do'	'I'	'heart'	'sky'

which very roughly means something like 'The world makes my spirits high'.

There doesn't seem to be widespread systematic variation between White and Blue/Green Hmong with regard to tone, although there are lots of words which are pronounced with one tone in one of the dialects, and another tone in the other.

An interesting aspect of Hmong tones (to linguists, anyway) is that sometimes the tone of a word will change, depending either on the function of the

of the word in a sentence, or on its proximity to other tones. One of these tone changes involves words pronounced with tone -m; sometimes these words are pronounced with another tone, phonetically a low rising tone represented in RPA as -d. So, for example, the word tom is pronounced [tɔ^{7}] when it functions as a preposition meaning 'to' or 'at', and is pronounced tod [tɔ^{8}] when it functions as an adverb meaning 'there'. Whether you consider tone -d as separate from -m, or a variant of -m and therefore not 'deserving' of a separate letter, depends on the particular linguistic theory you espouse. We don't want to go into all that here, but if you run across a word spelled with a final -d, you'll at least know it's not a misprint.

The other type of tone change that has been discovered is the shift from one tone to another when the word in question is preceded by a word with tone -b or -j. For example:

RPA:	tus tsov 'the tiger'	RPA:	ib tug tsov 'a tiger'
Pron:	[tu^{5} chɔ^{3}]	Pron:	[i^{1} tu^{6} chɔ^{3}]

Note that the word tus [tu^{5}] is pronounced (and spelled) with a different tone when it is preceded by the word ib [i^{1}], which has the high tone.

There's a more detailed discussion of these tone changes in the Heimbach dictionary, and there are several articles on them in linguistic journals.

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HMONG EDUCATION AND LITERACY IN LAOS

Linguists and anthropologists would describe traditional Hmong society as a non-literate, or pre-literate society, i.e. a society in which there is no generally accepted, conventional written representation of the language spoken by the people. Smalley describes a pre-literate culture as one in which "....a child can be born and grow up, an adult can live and die, without a strong need to read and write. He can live a normal existence within his own community without a feeling that he is in any way culturally deprived by lack of ability to communicate through marks made on paper. Life as he knows it does not include reading and writing as a major component." (From Phonemes and Orthography, p. 2).

In an isolated Hmong village, then, there are no schools, no newspapers, no books, no signs; children are taught the things they need to know by elders in their village, and literature is passed on orally from generation to generation.

Given the war in Laos, and the existence of air transportation and transistor radios, there are now probably very few traditional Hmong villages that haven't been touched in one way or another by outside influences. Even so, education - and with it literacy - among the Hmongs has been very limited.

There were no local schools at all for Hmong children to attend until 1939, and while the number of schools in Hmong regions has gradually increased since then, there are still areas in which schooling is simply not available. (Yang Dao, in his Les Hmongs du Laos Face Au Developpment, estimates that the literacy rate in some of the mountain regions is less than 1 per cent.)

In places where schooling has been available, the subject matter has always been in the Lao language. A Hmong child starting school has learned to read from a Lao primer, and all his textbooks thereafter have been in Lao. Classes are conducted in Lao, unless the teacher is a Hmong himself; in this case, presumably, the teacher uses Hmong until the children have learned enough

Lao to manage classroom instruction in it. If the teacher is a Lao, then all instruction has to be in Lao: there are very, very few Laos who speak Hmong. Yang See says that by 1969, 60 per cent of the teachers in local schools were Hmong, for the reason that of all of the graduates of the national teacher training school in Vientiane, it was generally only the Hmongs who were willing to teach in such isolated areas! And in a March, 1978, letter to us, the missionary Doris Whitelock says:

> 'Yes, the school teachers were mostly Hmong, certainly in Xieng Khouang province where I visited most. The books were in Lao but a lot was explained in Hmong. Girls went to school too as well as boys but it was mostly boys who went on for further schooling to the towns. There was quite a big drop-out rate in the first two years and many did the first year twice. This was because of the Lao teaching and the kids didn't hear Lao spoken in their villages. Then after a couple of years at school perhaps parents would find that they needed the children to help with the fields again...'

As the war in Laos progressed, Hmongs were forced down out of the mountains into refugee 'camps', which developed into fair-sized towns. In 1962, under the direction of Moua Lia, the Hmong primary school inspector for Xieng Khouang province (where the refugee towns are), Hmongs in the towns who had had some education were given a crash course in teaching, then put into newly-established schools in the area. From 1962 - 65, Hmong boys attended these schools, and after 1965, both boys and girls did. These schools were - and probably still are - conducted in Lao.

(While we're on the subject of Hmong refugee towns in Laos, we should mention a practical nursing program that was set up in Samthong by the U.S. Agency for International Development in 1964-65. This program was a two-month practical nursing course, open to anyone who was literate; it taught such skills as giving injections, measuring doses of medicine, and so on. The training was conducted in Lao, but Hmongs and Laos both participated. Women graduates of the program typically stayed at the hospital to work, and male graduates were assigned to various villages. After the fall of Samthong in March of 1970, the program was shifted to Ban Xon. There are graduates of this program among the Hmongs in the United States.)

There has been an alternative to local village schools, for Hmong families that could afford it. The alternative has been to send promising little boys down out of the mountains to school in the bigger towns in Laos. These little boys have been boarded with family contacts - mission headquarters, or often

with Chinese merchants who dealt with the Hmong villages - and sent to Lao elementary schools. Some of these boys have gone on to the national teacher training school (which requires only an elementary education for admission), or to French high schools (in which case they have had to learn French), or to Lao high schools (the first high school conducted in the Lao language opened in 1968). And a few of them have gone on to colleges and universities abroad: Yang Dao reports that as of 1971, there were thirty-seven Hmongs studying in various countries around the world. These educated Hmongs constitute an 'elite' - as Smalley calls them - out of whose ranks have come the Hmongs who have attained positions in the Lao government, and into whose hands has naturally fallen the interest in, and responsibility for, improving the educational conditions under which the general Hmong population has lived.

Schooling in the refugee camps in Thailand (where nearly all the Hmongs in the United States were before they came here) has been haphazard, but efforts have been made to provide the children with some kind of education. Yang See tells of the school that was build for the children in the Nam Phong camp in 1975: it had about fifteen classrooms, and teachers who had graduated from the national teacher training school or from high school were rounded up to teach (in Hmong). Two months after the school became operative, however, the refugees were all moved to another camp, and the school had to be organized all over again.

To summarize, educational opportunities for the Hmong in Laos have been very, very limited, except for the relatively few young men whose families sent them away to school. In a given Hmong community in the United States, then, the level of formal education is likely to be low. The older people, and women over twenty or so, will probably be illiterate. The amount and quality of the education received by the others will vary widely from individual to individual, even within the same family. Those who have gone to school for any length of time will be able to read the Lao alphabet. An individual will be able to read in Hmong only if he has been in contact with either the Catholic or Protestant missionaries, or if he has been taught by one of the Hmong 'elite'. If he can read Hmong, he will probably be able to do so in the RPA, or in a Lao-based alphabet which we'll discuss in the next section.

While opportunities for formal education have been limited for the Hmongs in Laos, opportunities to learn languages have been frequent. The Hmongs are not the only minority in Laos, and in the course of day-to-day living they come

in contact with other minorities, as well as with the Lao majority. A Hmong man who has never had the occasion or the need to learn to read, then, might very well have found it expedient to learn several languages: his native Hmong; Lao; either or both of the other minority languages of Yao or Khmu; and, if he lived close to a border, possibly Thai or Vietnamese. He is not likely to be daunted by the prospect of learning English, per se, on coming to the United States as a refugee.

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HMONG ALPHABET DEVELOPMENT IN LAOS

As we mentioned several times in the previous section, all education for the Hmongs in Laos has been in the Lao language (or in French). The Lao government, which was struggling to develop education in general in Laos, did not have the resources to worry about education in the minority languages. It was not until the western missionaries started work among the Hmong in Laos and Thailand that interest arose in developing a writing system for Hmong.

One of the first concerns - if not the very first - of an anthropologist, linguist or missionary working in a non-literate society is to develop an alphabet so he can write things down, not only for the sake of teaching the people in the society to read, but also for practical reasons having to do with his own research or work. (To begin with, the missionary, anthropologist or linguist generally has to learn the people's language, which is very hard to do without a way of writing things down. Even linguists who are at home with phonetic transcription prefer a practical alphabet because it's so much faster to use than phonetics. You will discover, if you try to write or type RPA, then the phonetic representation we have been enclosing in []'s, that there is no comparison between speeds!)

One of the first concerns of the missionaries in Laos, then, was to get Hmong written down. If you have worked through the previous section on the sound system of Hmong, you will realize that there is far, far more to developing an alphabet than simply listening to a language and writing down what you think you hear. If your own notes are to be consistent from day to day, and if your alphabet is to be even remotely learnable by native speakers of the language, you have to have a thorough understanding of the sound system, and work out an alphabet accordingly.

Both the Catholic and Protestant missionary groups working with the Hmongs in Laos were concerned with the sound system, and independently arrived at pretty much the same analysis. Between June, 1952, and April, 1953, the two groups met together, and developed the RPA. Here is an account, from the Third Report on Meo (Miao) by G. Linwood Barney and William A. Smalley, who were the Protestant missionaries involved:

> "During the period from June 1952 to April 1953, the main accomplishment was the laying out of an orthography for general use. This came about when it was found that the Catholic priests who were slightly ahead of us in their Meo program had arrived at and were using a system of writing which they were beginning to teach to the people, although as yet on a very modest scale. Conference with them showed that they were using a system of writing which revealed that their findings agreed fully with us on the phonemes of Meo. [Phonemes are sounds which the native speaker responds to as distinct from other sounds.] Our differences were only those of the symbols to be used for a given phoneme. In many points they recognized the greater usefulness of our system, and when the choice was purely arbitrary, a purely arbitrary compromise was reached - their symbols were chosen in about half the cases and ours in the other half....
>
> The Catholic priests have been highly pleased with the effectiveness of the orthography which they have been teaching to the White Meo. Several Christian striped Meo [a sub-group of Blue/Green] have learned to use it without systematic teaching from Barney..."

The Third Report goes on to explain that symbols for the RPA were chosen so that, first, there would be as few diacritical marks as possible, and second, that parallels among the consonants would be expressed.

In phonological studies, such features as aspiration, tones, and nasalization are generally represented with diacritical marks. In a practical alphabet, however, diacritical marks have their problems:

"Meo has both nasalization and seven tones, so orthography could become complicated if reliance was made on diacritics. For the various kinds of t's and k's we therefore chose different letters rather than diacritics. For nasalization at first we used a diacritic, but then changed to the double letter, which should probably be easier to teach to read, as big differences are easier to teach in reading and writing than small differences. For tones we followed a system which has been highly successful in the romanization of one of the Thai languages over here, namely using symbols which are consonants in English for the tones. In Meo these cause no ambiguity because syllables do not end with consonants, and we chose tone symbols which were not otherwise used, or which never began a syllable as much as possible...

The advantages to the Meo as well as to the missionary of this system, based on the principle of no diacritics, are a) easy learning because tones are marked in a clear fashion, are given just as much prominence as consonants and vowels, etc.; b) easy writing - too bad we still have i's to dot and t's to cross; c) easy printing - nothing occurs which is not on the typewriter or in the simplest printing font."
(from pp 1 - 2 of the Third Report.)

This last point - ease of printing - is of crucial importance in designing an alphabet for practical, everyday use. Writing by hand is no faster now than it was for medieval scribes who were working before the invention of the printing press. Moreover, such factors as the inventory of symbols on locally available typewriters have to be taken into consideration if the alphabet is expected to gain wide acceptance.

In representing the aspirated and unaspirated consonants, the missionaries were guided by the principle of parallelism or consistency in their choice of h following the relevant consonant to represent aspiration:

"the consonants are complicated enough so we tried to emphasize the parallelism of their construction:

p, ph, np, nph, pl, plh, nplh
t, th, nt, nth,
c, ch, nc, hch
r, rh, nr, nrh, etc....

By keeping to this parallelism we simplify the learning of the consonants, and Barney has found that beginning with the simple consonants p, t, c, r, k, q, etc., and building on them people learn rapidly. For example, adding h after each of the above is only one thing to learn, but if we used different symbols, like b for np, d for nt, etc., although it looks simpler because the words become shorter, the system would be more complicated because there are more things to learn." (From p. 2 of the Third Report.)

The result of all this work on the part of the missionaries is an alphabet which is internally consistent, and which accurately represents the sound system of Hmong. (This latter point - is accuracy in representing Hmong - is why we English speakers find it difficult to read, if not downright startling; Hmong and English have quite different sound systems!) These characteristics should make the alphabet easy to learn by native speakers of Hmong, and it seems to be just that: Yang See reports that Hmongs find it easy to pick up, even without formal literacy instruction.

The RPA is based on White Hmong pronunciation. In most cases, where pronunciation differs between the two dialects, White Hmong pronunciation was represented because the White Hmongs have a contrast (between hm and m, for example) that the Blue/Green Hmongs don't have. It is easier to learn that two symbols represent the same sound (Blue/Green Hmongs learn that both hm and m represent the sound [m]) than it is to learn that one symbol stands for two different sounds (which is what the White Hmongs would have to learn if both their [hm] and [m] were represented just by m.)

In the case of the symbols d and dh, however, the principle of parallelism would require that the Blue/Green pronunciation of [tl] and [t'l] be followed, rather than the White [d] and [dh]. Even so, the alphabet follows White pronunciation.

These problems notwithstanding, the RPA seems to work just fine for both White and Blue/Green. As we mentioned in the discussion of vowels, only the a - aa - ia sounds seem to require being spelled differently from dialect to dialect.

The RPA caught on, certainly among the missionaries who developed it. It was used in the Dictionnaire Hmong (Meo Blanc) - Francais, written by the Catholic missionary Yves Bertrais, and published by the Catholic Mission in Vientiane in 1964; and in the White Meo-English Dictionary written by the Protestant missionary Ernest E. Heimbach, and published by the Overseas Missionary Fellowship in Thailand in 1966.

The RPA also caught on among the Hmong boys and men who had been sent away to school in the bigger towns in Laos. It quickly became the means by which they wrote to one another, and, because it was easy to learn, they found it easy to teach on an informal basis in their villages. (Yang See says that the boys taught their girlfriends back home the alphabet, so that they could write letters to them!)

In 1962, some of these men set up the Hmong Literature Committee, which had as its goals the writing of Hmong oral literature and history, the creating of new Hmong words, and the publishing of a news bulletin in Hmong. This committee was founded during the administration of the then-rightist Deputy Prime Minister, Phoummi Nosavanne. A Hmong named Tou By Lyfoung, then Minister of Health and Welfare, helped to legalize this committee. (Tou By Lyfoung's younger brother, Lysao Lyfoung, headed the new Literature Committee.) In November of 1962, the committee received legal permission to use the RPA, under the legislation number 172--Ministry of the Interior. The committee designed a primer in 1962, and also started publishing the newsletter Xov Xwm Ntawv Hmoob [sɔ^{3} sɨ^{7} ndɨ^{3} hmong^{1}]. In 1967, the primer was revised, and illustrations for each letter were added.

The RPA was also used for radio scripts. Between 1962 and 1963, the Vientiane National Radio Station broadcast programs in Hmong, and from 1964 until the fall of the Royal Lao Government in 1975, so did the United Lao Races radio station in Long Tieng. Scripts for these programs were written in the RPA.

In the meantime, interest had arisen among the Protestant missionaries - among them Smalley, who had helped develop the RPA - in developing a Lao-based alphabet for Hmong. In general, there are very good practical, political, psychological and pedagogical reasons for choosing an alphabet for a minority language which is close to the alphabet used for the majority language. (The first two chapters of Smalley's Phonemes and Orthography are a discussion of these reasons.) Around 1968, Smalley and another missionary, Doris Whitelock, worked out a Lao-based alphabet. In a March, 1978, letter to us, Miss Whitelock writes:

> 'Bill Smalley and I put the Hmong into the Lao script about 1968. I did some trial primers, then revised and submitted it [the Lao-based alphabet] to the Lao government. They printed two primers for us in 1970 (with U. S. money). 10,000 were printed of each primer. They [the primers] had a letter of explanation why we were using the Lao-based script was 'because the Lao government absolutely and utterly forbid us to use a Roman (French) script.' They also said that they wanted the Hmong, which were the largest of the [minority] ethnic groups to be able to study Lao like Lao children. And the other reason (valid or otherwise) was that government wanted the teachers who were responsible for teaching Hmong children to know the Meo language so that it would be easy for them to teach the children. This would help the country, etc., in the future.'

(Moua Chou sent us a copy of a primer in the Lao-based alphabet, the title of which we have reproduced here.)

ໜ່ວ ๑

ໜ່ວ ເກົ່ວດ໌ ເໝ໋ົ່ວ ຮ໋ົ

This it the title page of the Protestant Mission's primer in the Lao-based alphabet. Under the illustration is that alphabet's spelling of RPA Phau Kawm Ntawv Hmoob, which translates as 'book study alphabet Hmong', or 'Hmong Primer'. At the side of the illustration is Phau 'book', and the symbol for the number 1.

The Protestant mission also put out a Hymnal, and a New Testament. Miss Whitelock estimates that 'between 1,500 and 2,000 learned to read the Lao-based script in various stages of fluency.

The Protestants' Lao-based alphabet ran into opposition. Here is how Smalley characterizes it:

> "Lemoine 1972, which is a generally good survey of the various Hmong orthographies (indigenous and foreign, developed in China and Laos), is rather sharply critical of the Lao-based system...He is, on the other hand, quite favourably inclined to the western letter system [Smalley is referring to the RPA] described here. A close reading of his article will show that he operates from some different assumptions than those we have stated as lying behind this book. He is also quite misinformed about the usefulness of the system. It is being easily and quickly learned by hundreds of villagers, both those literate in Lao and those who are not. It has established roots quickly there because (in contrast to Hmong in Thailand) the drive to literacy in Hmong is relatively high. This is not to discount the strong opposition from a core of Hmong elite who use the western letter system...This is natural, and to be respected. They have established a pattern of communication through the western letter system. It is efficient, less cumbersome than the Lao-based system, and distinctively their "own"...
>
> "Perhaps I should put on record the fact that even when the western letter system was agreed upon I was reluctant not to have a Lao-based system. I did not follow through and prepare one because I had not worked out how to do it, Laos was still a French country, and Bertrais [the author of one of the Hmong dictionaries we mentioned earlier, and also one of the Catholic missionaries who worked on the development of the RPA] was strongly opposed. Soon after the development of the system the Protestant mission was informed by the government that it could not use that western-letter based system for the Hmong, a ruling which it followed although another major mission did not. The government has endorsed the Lao-based system, and has endorsed the primers for use in the schools." (From p. 120 of Phonemes and Orthography.)

According to Yang See - who was on the Literature Committee from 1967 on - the objections on the part of the Hmong 'elite' to the Lao-based alphabet were, first, that the 'elite' had not been consulted about their preferences before the Protestant missionaries approached the Lao government, and second, that the Lao-based alphabet was not as efficient as the RPA, and therefore harder to learn. (Hmong has some sounds that Lao doesn't have and vice versa, so the Lao alphabet has to be altered to represent Hmong.) In addition, the Lao alphabet system is, from a purely linguistic point of view, a more complicated system than the RPA.

As of Spring, 1974, none of the Hmong civil or military leaders had been informed by the government that the Protestant mission's Lao-based alphabet had

been granted official status. At a meeting of all Hmong military and clan leaders at that time to decide which alphabet should be recommended as the official Hmong alphabet to the Lao government, the majority voted for the RPA. The alphabet that came in second was the Lao-based alphabet that had been designed by the Pathet Lao. The Protestant mission's Lao-based alphabet came in last.

Yang See says that the Pathet Lao's alphabet was the second choice for two reasons. First, a primer in this alphabet had been written (with color illustrations!), and had been used to teach Hmong students in Pathet-Lao-controlled schools, so many Hmong who were allies of the Pathet Lao already knew how to read and write this alphabet. And second, the Protestant mission's Lao-based alphabet would never have been accepted by the Hmongs on the Pathet Lao side, as it would be in competition with their own alphabet; so in the event of a coalition government, it was in the interests of the Hmongs who supported the Royal Lao Government to support the Pathet Lao's alphabet.

In any event, the Hmongs on the Pathet Lao side of the war were - and undoubtedly still are - using a Lao-based script for Hmong, and those on the Royal Lao Government's side were using the RPA. This latter group, of course, is the group from which the Hmong refugees come.

THE USE OF RPA AMONG THE REFUGEES

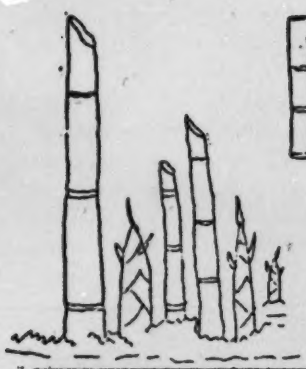
Outside of Laos, there are no political or pedagogical reasons for using a Lao-based alphabet for Hmong; the ease with which RPA can be typed on any western typewriter, combined with its efficiency as an alphabet and the fact that the educated Hmong refugees prefer it, have made it a natural choice of alphabet for newsletters, literacy programs and so on among the Hmong refugees.

The Hmong refugees in the Ban Vinai camp in Thailand have used the RPA in the first issue of a newsletter Ntsuag Hlav [njua^{6} hla^{3}] 'Bamboo Shoot'; the first page is reproduced on the following page (note the Thai writing above the title).

Miss Whitelock reports the following activities at the Pua Nan camp in Thailand, where she is currently working:

> 'The camp I'm working in has 13,000 plus refugees. Of these about 11,000 are Hmong. We had to make a decision about what script to use now as we couldn't go on printing stuff in a Lao alphabet. Politically and in other ways the decision should have been for a Thai-based alphabet, but as none of the 50,000 Hmong refugees now in Thailand expect to

คติเตือนใจวัยรุ่นชาวเขา



Ntsuag HLAV

TSAB 1 . LUB 2 HLIS XYOO 1978. - 5/1 Soi 12 Charoen Prathet. Chiangmai.

ROOJ NTAWV CEV LUS

Nyob zoo txog tsoom nyeem uas muaj meej mom sawv daws.
Ua ntej no peb rooj ntawv Hmoob NTSUAG HLAV xav tias peb Hmoob feem coob kuj nyiam nyeem ntawv txhua yam. Li ntawd peb thiaj tau npaj muaj ib tsab ntawv pub rau tsoom nyeem ntawv kom tau raws li lub siab nyiam thiab xav.
Xam tau tias tsab ntawv no yog xyoo ib tsab ib; xav tias yuav npaj tawm ninj lub hlis, saib puas tau, ntshai tsam muaj teeb meem los quas xwb. Peb zoo siab ntaus vej vim peb sib ntsib hauv tsab ntawv no yog thawj zaug.
Peb rooj ntawv NTSUAG HLAV xav pab peb cov Hmoob ib nrab kom tau txais tej lo lus tshiab, tej lub tswv yim tshiab uas yuav tsa tau Hmoob lub neej.
Tej tus nws kuj xav nthuav tswv yim nrog lwm tus phooj ywg. Tsab ntawv no yuav ua ib txog kev sib fim rau peb tsoom Hmoob sawv daws, kom peb tsoom Hmoob sawv daws rov sib to taub txog pob Hmoob lub neej lawm yav tom ntej. Xav tias txoj kev nyiam nyeem ntawv txhua yam yog ib txog kev qhia rau peb tsoom Hmoob taug, ib txog kev tshav ntuj. Peb tseem npaj siab tias yuav ua tiag npaj kom tau raws li sawv daws lub siab xav thiab raws tej yam sawv daws nyiam. Txawm peb cov tuav hauj lwm tau ua tej yam tsis zoo tsis haum sawv daws siab los nyaj nej yuav zam lub txim txhaum rau peb, rau qhov peb yeej tsis paub yuav npleem ko taw thaum twg. Vim peb puav leej yog cov tuav hauj lwm tshiab tsis paub ua dua ib zaug.
Peb rooj ntawv zoo siab txais tej yam uas nej pom tias yuav txhaum kev txhaum cai. Vim tej lo lus ntawd yuav ua ib daig iav uas yuav pab kho peb txoj hauj lwm thiab peb lub neej kom zoo zuj zus lawm tom ntej.
Thaum kawg no peb rooj ntawv Hmoob vam tias nej cov nyeem sawv daws yuav pab peb koom tes vuav pab txhawb peb lub rooj ntawv Hmoob kom zoo mus. Nej muaj tej zaj lus dab tsi yuav luam tawm, peb zoo siab nqa tes txais huv tib si. Tsuav yog nej cov zaj txhcb muaj cov lus txwv nyob phab ob ntawm nplooj ua ntej.
Thov ua tsaug.

LUS CEEB TOOM.

Thov ceeb toom rau cov neeg tau txais tsab ntawv NTSUAG HLAV sawv daws paub. Yog nej leej twg muaj lus nug peb rooj ntawv Hmoob NTSUAG HLAV los muaj lwm yam mas nej sau ntawv tuaj nug peb tau.
Peb yuav qhia chaw sau ntawv rau nej raws li nram no:

This is a reduced copy of the first page of a newsletter from the Ban Vinai Camp in Thailand, dated February 1978.

> stay in Thailand I knew it would be one long battle trying to get anyone literate. The Thai system of writing is even more complicated than Lao. I first worked on the Thai-based alphabet with Bill [Smalley] about 1964 I think it was and people did learn to read but it was a struggle. Anyway, Herb Purnell [a linguist who has worked on the sound system of Hmong, and who is a consultant for the Overseas Missionary Fellowship] helped us make the decision to go back to the Rom [RPA] for the refugees which we did.... Well, with all the mail coming into the camps from the USA and France and other places, there is a terrific boom in the literacy business. I have eight different groups going a couple of hours a day in various areas of the camp. Some of the classes have over ninety in them! Some classes for adults and some for children. Besides that the Roman Catholics have classes and there are little private classes in homes. It's something I've dreamed about for years and wondered if I would ever see the day it would happen! The primers I did were a make-shift job in a hurry to get folk started a couple of years ago, but I'm convinced that the Hmong will learn from any kind of primer if they have the motivation to read...'

In the United States, the RPA has been used in newsletters published by the Hmongs in Orange County, California, and in Hawaii, and it will be used in a newsletter currently being planned by The Association for Hmongs.

It should be evident that there is a big difference between having an alphabet in which to write one's language, and having that alphabet as the recognized official one for the language. Once the speakers of a language settle on an alphabet, the support of whoever it is that is running the country is necessary, if the alphabet is to be used in books, if the language is to be taught in that alphabet in the public schools, and if the language is to be accepted as an official language of the country (in which case signs will be translated, government documents will be printed in all the relevant languages, and so on).

Although the RPA was used by the educated Hmongs on the Royal Lao Government's side of the war, it was never adopted to any official extent by the government, and so for practical purposes Hmong remained an unwritten language until the government fell in 1975. Now, presumably, the Pathet Lao alphabet for Hmong is on its way to being granted official status.

The RPA's new-ness, and its lack of official status, is reflected in several ways. There is, for example, no set order of letters, for children to learn or for dictionaries to be alphabetized in. (The Heimbach dictionary lists the vowels first, then the consonants in an order roughly approximating that of

English, German and French. The Bertrais dictionary, on the other hand, puts the vowels in among the consonants.) There are also no set conventions for punctuation; there is no established way to handle foreign words of more than one syllable that have been borrowed into Hmong: do you 'assign' each syllable a tone marker, then run all the syllables together? Or do you leave a space between each syllable? (We ran across this problem in working on the grammar of Hmong: we were working on the translation of the sentence 'Pia intends to learn English', and were faced with the word [a^{5} me^{5} li^{5} ka^{5}], the word for 'American'. We had no idea, and neither did Yang See, whether it should be spelled As mes lis kas, or Asmesliskas. We compromised, and decided on As-mes-lis-kas, with hyphens!)

Another ramification of the lack of official status for RPA as the alphabet for Hmong is the wild variation that can be seen in the French and English spellings of Hmong names. When users of one alphabet system come into contact with users of another alphabet system, conventions become established for transliterating (which means shifting from one alphabet to another) between the languages involved. There are, for example, conventions for transliterating the Lao alphabet into Roman letters; the Lao symbols for aspirated [t], which are ຖ and ທ, are conventionally transliterated as th - that's why Pathet is spelled with the h, although it's pronounced [pat'et]. The Lao symbols ຸ and ູ, which represent the vowel [u], are conventionally transliterated as ou. (The influence of French can be seen in the transliteration conventions like this last: French typically spells the vowel [u] with an ou.)

As Hmong has not had an official alphabet, it has not been possible for conventions to be established for the spelling of Hmong names or words, and so Hmong speakers - or Americans working with them - have had to improvise. The various spellings of the clan name [li^{5}], which is Lis in the RPA, are an example of the results: as we mentioned earlier, we have run across Ly, Li, Lee, and Le.

Apropos of clan names, here is Moua Chou's list again, this time with their spellings in the RPA and in the phonetic representation we have been using.

RPA	Pron.	Other spelling(s)
Tsab	[cha^{1}]	Chang
Faj	[fa^{2}]	Fang
Hawj	[hə$\imath^{2}$]	Heu, Her
Koo	[kong^{4}]	Kong

RPA	Pron.	Other spelling(s)
Kwm	[kɨ^{7}]	Kue
Khab	[k'a^{1}]	Khang
Lauj	[lau^{2}]	Lo, Lor
Lis	[li^{5}]	Ly, Li, Lee, Le
Muas	[mua^{5}]	Moua
Phab	[p'a^{1}]	Phang
Thoj	[t'ɔ^{2}]	Thao, Tao
Vaj	[va^{2}]	Vang
Vwj	[vɨ^{2}]	Vue
Xyooj	[syong^{2}]	Xiong, Shoong
Yaj	[ya^{2}]	Yang

You'll notice that there are discrepancies between the pronunciation of many of the clan names, and the way they are spelled by non-Hmongs. Some of these discrepencies can be accounted for, probably, by dialect differences (remember that Blue/Green Hmong has [ang] where White Hmong has [a]). In addition, many of the Hmong clan names are similar to, or identical with, Chinese clan names, and spelling conventions for the Chinese clan names have undoubtedly played a part in the Roman spellings for the Hmong clans.

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